Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Establishment Stalwart, Becomes Malaysia's New PM

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Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia's incoming premier Ismail Sabri Yaakob is a veteran politician from the country's longest-ruling party, but analysts say he is a stop-gap leader with little chance of ending long-running turbulence.

The 61-year-old was named prime minister Friday after the collapse of Muhyiddin Yassin's administration this week, and is Malaysia's third new premier in less than four years.

He is from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the main party in a coalition that governed Malaysia for decades after independence.

Relatively low profile most of his career, he rose to greater prominence during Muhyiddin's 17-month administration.

As defence minister, he gave daily briefings on the fight against the pandemic and was promoted to deputy prime minister in the administration's final days.

His links between different factions may give the new government marginally stronger backing in parliament than during the chaotic Muhyiddin era, analysts say.

Ismail Sabri is "a bridge between the different camps in (Muhyiddin's party) and UMNO -- the man in the right place", said Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia expert from the University of Nottingham.

But his government is effectively an expanded version of the one that just fell apart -- Muhyiddin and his allies are supporting him -- and he has not been elected by the public.

The king picked the prime minister based on who commands most support in parliament rather than going for an election for fear it could worsen a dire virus outbreak.

'Covid mismanagement'

He is likely to face constant attacks from the opposition, and risks starting his term with damaged credibility as he was key figure in overseeing the last administration's widely criticised pandemic response.

"He was a leader... in the Covid mismanagement," said Welsh. "The policies were seen to not be very effective."

UMNO were ejected from power by voters in 2018 amid graft allegations, but managed to regain a foothold in power as part of Muhyiddin's government.

And by regaining the premiership without an election, they risk stoking public anger, analysts warn.

From the eastern state of Pahang, Ismail Sabri worked as a lawyer before entering politics, and has held cabinet posts

including as agriculture minister and rural development minister.

A member of the country's ethnic Malay Muslim majority, he courted controversy on occasion with remarks criticised for fanning racial tensions.

In 2019, while in opposition, he reportedly called on Muslims to wage "jihad" against the then-ruling coalition -- which was ethnically diverse -- and accused it of being anti-Islam.

Race and religion are sensitive in Malaysia. About 60 percent of Malaysia's 32 million population are Malay but it is also home to substantial ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

Ultimately, Ismail Sabri may only end up being short-lived leader.

"Under ordinary circumstances, he would not have been given a chance," said James Chin, a Malaysia expert from the University of Tasmania.

"Unless he grows into the job, he will only be there until the next general election."

- AFP